DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 039 FL 010 506

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TITLE The Functional-Notional Approach to Second Language Learning and Teaching: Starting with the Learner's Communicative Needs.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at American Educational Research Association Meeting (San Francisco, California, April 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; Adults; Communication Skills; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Educational Objectives; Language Instruction; Language Proficiency; *Learning Activities; *Second Language Learning; Skill Development; *Speech Communication; Student Needs; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Notional Syllabus

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the functional-notional approach to language teaching and learning in terms of the ways it can be used to meet the communicative needs of the potential language learners, particularly adults, who vary in what they want to do in the target language. It contrasts the functional system with conventional approaches, illustrates differences in the organization of language information by function and by structure, and discusses implications for instructional design. It concludes with a brief sketch of an instructional development scenario that might employ this approach. (Author)

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# THE FUNCTIONAL-NOTIONAL APPROACH TO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING: STARTING WITH THE LEARNER'S COMMUNICATIVE NEEDS

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Margaret is a nurse-practitioner. She's planning to go to Guatemala for two years to work in a well-baby clinic there.

Alice is a civil engineer working for an international engineering firm based in New York. She's just been assigned to a team of Venezuelans and Americans that will build a dam in Eastern Venezuela. On this assignment, she will talk with fellow engineers and workmen in the field, read many technical manuals, and write instructions and reports.

Helen is a graduate student in a Ph.D. program in comparative literature. Her dissertation will be on modern drama; she wants to be able to read plays written in Spain during that country's civil war, and contemporary reviews of the works.

If these three potential language students were to walk into a typical classroom in the United States, all three would encounter the identical syllabus, textbook and supplementary language tapes. If the course were individualized, each would be encouraged to proceed through the materials at her own pace; however the material presented, the order of presentation, and the relative emphasis on one aspect of the language or another would not vary. Each student would practice reading and writing compositions, each would listen to audiotapes in the language lab and each would make some tentative attempts to talk to any Spanish speakers she might meet. And each of the students would be frustrated, probably at least a little bit angry, and convinced that her time was being wasted.

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Why? Because although each of the women described needs to "learn Spanish", their communicative needs--what they need to be able to do in Spanish--vary considerably. Margaret, the nurse, will spend her work day in conversation with patients, parents, and other medical personnel. She will read labels and write prescriptions. Alice, the civil engineer, will converse with workmen and fellow professionals on a variety of technical topics and will read and write reports in technical engineering language. Helen, the graduate student, will read literary prose almost exclusively in her work. She won't read much "conversational" prose, and will never need to speak or listen to Spanish.

There is a school of thought in language pedagogy which says that Margaret, Alice, and Helen all need to "learn the language". That usually means that each of them should be equally adept at aural comprehension, formal and conversational speech, reading of everything from soup cans to poetry, and writing of both simple notes and literary essays. That broad-band intention is usually operationalized as narrow-band instruction which prepares all three women to be Helen--that is, readers of literary prose and poetry, period.

But what about Margaret and Alice? How do we design language instruction which meets their communicative needs; that is, allows them to learn those aspects of the language which they need for job performance in the target language, in this case Spanish?

This paper describes one approach to meeting the needs of adult language learners with specific, job-related needs in a way that is cost-effective in terms of both hours and dollars. The Functional approach is one aspect of a system for second language learning and teaching that has been developed over the course of the present decade by a group of European scholars associated with the Council on Cultural Cooperation of the Council of Europe. These

scholars saw that adult language learners had diverse communicative needs related to both their many different occupations and to their varied social interactions.

They saw that the adult audience was by nature busy and conscious of making efficient use of valuable time; therefore language instruction would have to be tailored to fulfilling the learner's communicative needs as s/he saw them to be sufficiently motivating to attract and keep the adult learner's time and attention.

They also saw that any new system intended to be cost-effective and usable on a large scale--in contrast with a one-on-one system such as Berlitz--would have to break down the global concept of learning "the language" into units based on the communicative situations in which adult learners are characteristically involved. They knew, however, that an approach which simply created memorizable dialogues to cover frequently occurring situations would not give the learner the flexibility s/he needed to function well in a new situation.

The European scholars created a system for developing language instruction based on factoring out the different variables that operate in any language use situation--time and place, means of communication, audience, purpose, and topic. Two of the key variables, the purposes of the language act and the topics, are known in their system as <u>functions</u> and <u>notions</u>. The latter concept provides a way of dividing up and specifying the universe of things that people talk about. Some common notional categories are those of time, place, duration, and color. It is the concept of functions, however, that represents a significant departure from traditional ways of looking at language instruction, so we will focus our attention on that part of the system.

To understand the difference, let's look first at the traditional approach. Conventional approaches to both the analysis of language needs and to language teaching/learning start with the structures or patterns of the language; they start by asking which language structures should be taught, and in which order. The first step in such approaches is dividing up the whole body of the target language by categories such as tenses, declensions, and conjugations. The second step is arranging the elements according to the level of difficulty thought to be involved in learning them. Course developers then can use this information to arrange a teaching syllabus which groups grammatically similar structures. This approach can be effective; generations of students have learned language structures from instruction based on it.

But for learners like Margaret, Alice, and Helen with specific communicative needs, this approach can be frustrating and not cost-effective in terms of the calories they invest. Let's look at why it doesn't work.

First, students taught a sequence of language structures often cannot generalize the patterns they have learned to the specific contexts or situations involved in job performance. In other words, Margaret, Alice or Helen can't use what she knows.

Secondly, the structural approach is inefficient. Every learner is taught the entire grammatical system, with equal emphasis on each part, in spite of the fact that actual needs for facility with different parts of the system may differ radically for language users in different occupational contexts. Margaret may need say-it-in-her-sleep facility with imperative forms in order to function in the clinic, while Helen may encounter those forms only infrequently.

Thirdly, although bringing together grammatically identical sentences may seem logical from an analyst's point of view, from the point of view of

the language learner and user it can be meaningless and artificial. In real acts of communication, language users mix and match sentence types according to what they want to say.

What does the learner want or need to say? That's the pivotal question; that's the question a functional analysis starts with, rather than beginning with the different ways to say it. The functional approach begins by defining the context in which the target language is used, and then specifies the grammatical patterns which normally appear in those contexts.

At this point a reasonable question would probably be: what are functions anyway? Language functions are the purposes for which people use language. For example people use language to make offers, to express displeasure, to interrupt, to identify objects or persons, and to introduce themselves. Most language functions can be expressed in a number of different ways, in sentences that use a variety of grammatical patterns. Let's look at an example. Figure 1 shows that the function "direct" (in the sense of command or give orders) can be expressed using many different sentence structures. The user of one sentence pattern or another can introduce important differences in style and/or the emotional tone of the exchange, but all are ways of expressing that function.

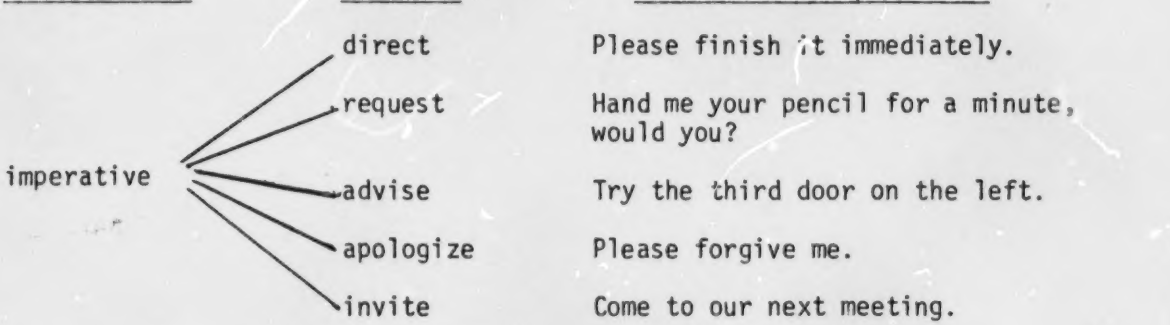
| function | sentence forms | realizations/expressions |
|---|---|---|
| direct | imperative | Change the bandages once a day. |
| | conditional | It would be helpful if you would run the errand right now. |
| | infinitive | You're expected to report for duty at 7 a.m. tomorrow. |
| | modal | You'll have to start right now. |
| | participial | You should have no difficulty finishing your report by noon. |

Adapted from Allen, 1977

Figure 1

In each of the sentence realizations above the speaker is specifying an action to be carried out by someone else; in each case, while the grammatical pattern varies, the function or purpose of the communication remains the same.

By now it should be clear that there is not a one-to-one relationship between grammatical structures on one hand, and the functions they express on the other. Figure 2 shows the 'flip side of the coin' presented in Figure 1. While the first illustration demonstrates that the imperative construction is one of the sentence forms that can be used to "direct", Figure 2 shows that the imperative pattern can also be used to express other functions.




Adapted from Allen, 1977

Figure 2

Besides being used to give an order or direction, we can see here that the imperative form is also commonly used to make a request, to give advice, to invite, or to make an apology. All of these are very different purposes of communication which use a common grammatical pattern.

Figures 1 and 2 show that grammatical structures or patterns vary independently of variation in function. What are the implications of this for the instruction we will design for Margaret, Alice, and Helen? A few of them are as follows:

1. "How to say it" goes hand in hand with "when to say it". Teaching a student a set of grammatical structures won't necessarily give him/her the

functional facility s/he needs.

2. Organizing a syllabus by functions provides a way to sequence instruction that makes sense to the learner. S/he can see ways to fulfill his/her communicative needs; that motivation inspires further efforts to learn.

3. Within a given function whose mastery is deemed necessary for a given class of learners, the course designer can chose certain modes of expression to be emphasized, de-emphasized, or even not taught at all depending on considerations of grammatical complexity.

A brief example may be useful here. Let's say that a functional analysis of Margaret's communicative needs shows that she needs to have command of many different functions, for example, "expressing hope or anticipation," which are realized in Spanish using subjunctive forms. In the conventional Spanish classroom the subjunctive is introduced late and usually given less than rigorous practice. In the "function-oriented" class, subjunctive forms would be introduced early, since they would be needed to achieve mastery of functions identified as critical.

And how does this all fit together in an instructional design/development plan? We'll close with a quick sketch which will hopefully answer that question.

Let's pretend we're designing Spanish instruction that will fill the communicative needs of Margaret and other nurse-practitioners. We mount a two-pronged attack on the problem.

Prong 1. We find a nurse-practitioner already working in a setting similar to Margaret's. Similarity of work requirements are more important to us than whether s/he speaks Spanish on the job. We interview him/her to find out what kinds of language use situations are part of doing that job, we follow him/her around and take some notes ourselves about communication situations that might have been neglected, and we probably give him/her a tape recorder

to record samples of the kinds of language interactions that occur during job performance. Later, the language analyst will map the language situations that are identified onto a set of functional requirements, that is, define each situation in terms of the functional knowledge it requires.

Prong 2. In this stage the grammatical information about the language is organized according to functions to make a "function catalog". An inventory of all the functions of language that are relevant to a particular frame of reference, e.g., jobs, is compiled. In one system, they have been grouped into six major categories: Seeking and Imparting Factual Information, Expressing Intellectual Attitudes, Expressing Emotional Attitudes, Getting Things Done (Suasion), Elementary Social Rituals, and Managing Communication. When the list has been compiled, a team of native speaker(s) and language analyst(s) generates for each function a list of all the different ways that it can be expressed or realized. Some of these realizations will be in the form of sentences, some in the form of short phrases; most will appear as partly specified sentence patterns.

Putting it all together. Now it remains to join the products of our two-pronged attack. For each function identified as critical in Prong 1, the course developer selects from the function catalog developed in Prong 2 those realizations which are the appropriate level of difficulty for the learners in question. These patterns or phrases will form the basis of the instructional syllabus. If Margaret is a beginner, the patterns she learns will be grammatically simple; if she is somewhat more advanced, the patterns will be correspondingly more complex. But in any case her instruction will be arranged so that each functional requirement is met, each communicative need is filled, and she feels that she is making good progress toward competence in Spanish.

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